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WILL THE PEACE PROCESS IN IRELAND SURVIVE BREXIT?

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When “Britannia ruled the waves”, Matthew Arnold defined the “English genius” as “steadiness with honesty”, in contrast to the Celtic character, “an indomitable reaction against the despotism of fact”. As the Brexit countdown accelerates with no detailed UK proposals forthcoming, the situation has reversed. The consequences for Ireland, both the Republic that will remain in the European Union and Northern Ireland that must leave, are forcing Brexiters to react reluctantly to the despotism of fact, while Ireland and the EU maintain a steady honesty about what Brexit means. The Irish situation has focused the EU’s approach to negotiations, stymied the British approach and forged a new role and identity for Ireland in the EU. A botched UK withdrawal from the EU threatens disaster for both parts of Ireland.

Brexit is the tyranny of ideology over politics. The EU draws up legal proposals; the UK offers tautologies (“Brexit means Brexit”) or platitudes (“no deal is better than a bad deal”, ignoring the fact that “no deal” is a “bad deal”). For Brexiters, the “recovery” of national sovereignty solves the ills of supranational globalisation. For the EU, supranational sovereignty buffers national citizens from the turbulent global capitalist market. By diluting national sovereignties in a single market, the EU as a whole has become the world’s largest economy. Brexiters say they know they must abandon the benefits of the EU, but scheme to “cherry-pick” advantages from the single market without the concomitant obligations of membership. Brexiters want to leave the single market and customs union, the EU Court and budget, and the free movement of EU citizens. This rules out participation in the European Economic Area. Brexiters say they will negotiate advantageous trade deals with every country in the world, including the EU, displaying the smugness of “Rule Britannia” when Britannia no longer rules. They will have to compete against a much larger EU economy and market. The EU wants agreement on the status of EU citizens in the UK, on the budget the UK still owes, and on the status of Ireland and the Good Friday Peace Agreement that includes the EU in its enforcement. Without agreement on Ireland there will be no deal (without Spanish agreement over Gibraltar there will be no deal either).

In order to begin negotiations the UK had to guarantee Brexit would not compromise the status quo of the peace process on the island of Ireland, based on a British-Irish international agreement. The very next day, Brexiter Ministers said that guarantee could be ignored, raising the spectre of “perfidious Albion”.

If Brexiters will ignore the binding commitments of other international agreements, why would they comply with an EU agreement? When the EU rewrote the guarantee as a legally binding text the implications horrified the UK government and its Unionist partners from Northern Ireland. The Union that defines the UK makes Brexit and the Irish status quo incompatible. If the UK leaves the EU, and if Northern Ireland remains part of the UK, then Northern Ireland leaves the EU and an EU border will divide the island of Ireland (and Cyprus will no longer be the only partitioned country in the EU).

The Peace Agreement that ended the violence and obviated the border (one of the causes of the violence) was premised on the fact that both Ireland and the UK were EU members. The retrograde Brexit process reverses the dilution of national sovereignties through shared EU membership that facilitated the Peace Agreement. More than 140 specific areas in the agreement directly involve the EU. Detailed reports from the House of Lords predict Brexit's devastating impact on the economy and on the Peace Process. To negotiate an EU trade agreement, the UK committed itself to a default or "backstop" solution that would harmonise Northern Ireland with the EU customs union and thus avoid a "hard border" if no other solution were to be found.

Such an arrangement would effectively separate Northern Ireland from Great Britain, something unacceptable to the Unionists who keep the government in power. Now Downing Street wants to interpret this commitment to include all of the UK, thereby maintaining indefinitely a de facto customs union with the EU (a proposal rejected as "fantasy" by the EU). The UK government is debating two other possible solutions. One would be a customs "partnership" (not a customs "union") in which the UK would collect EU tariffs on behalf of the EU on all goods passing through the UK on their way to the EU -a possibility rejected out of hand by an EU that cannot allow a third party to enforce its trade rules. The other would be advanced technology that would create borders but provide "maximum facilitation" of cross-border movement ("Max Fac") -also rejected out of hand by the EU. Neither solution would be workable in the foreseeable future. Brexit is just around the corner. To get a trade deal the UK must solve the Irish problem, but the solution would be the dilution, if not the disintegration of the UK, or the reversal of Brexit.

In a country without a written Constitution, Brexit has provoked a series of constitutional crises, if not an existential one. Scotland voted to remain in the EU by 62%, Northern Ireland by 56%, Gibraltar by 96%. The Unionists who keep the UK government in power misrepresent the wishes of the Northern Irish electorate. The majority of Parliament wants to remain in the EU, or at least in the customs union. The Lords have consistently contradicted the government on every aspect of its Brexit policy. The executive branch will not allow a binding say in the matter for the devolved assemblies of Scotland or Northern Ireland and wants to avoid giving Parliament a say as well. A rump group of Brexiters is usurping the sovereignty of representatives of the people on the basis of a tiny referendum majority for a Leave vote that surprised its own supporters. Brexit was about party politics, electioneering, back-stabbing and power plays among the Tories and widespread social discontent, not the EU or globalisation.

One of the ironies resulting from this turmoil is the unanticipated resurgence of the possibility of reunifying Ireland if a majority of the population of the North voted in favour (Theresa May has revealed her doubts that a "border poll" in the North would preserve the Union). Another is the fact that the peace process only progressed when all sides accepted the need for consensus, abandoning blind adherence to a given ideology. Brexiters either ignore or reject this political wisdom. Negotiations are still under way. The Unionists may be wrong to trust the government in London. The UK could sacrifice Northern Ireland for the sake of

Great Britain. Nor can Ireland be entirely sure that the common front displayed so far by the rest of the EU will endure. Difficult decisions must be made. The EU seems to be clear about what it will not accept. The British side is divided and bewildered, and ready to blame Ireland and/or the EU for the consequences of a Brexit disaster. Perhaps imaginative solutions to the Irish dilemma will emerge in time, or perhaps no deal will be the worst deal.